

Improving Employment Opportunities for Formerly Displaced Youth in Northern Uganda

The national youth (persons between 18 and 30 years of age) unemployment rate in Uganda currently stands at 19.7 per cent, and a significant proportion are returned, formerly displaced youth, displaced as a result of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) civil war in the northern part of the country. Despite resettlement, youth in these communities continue to be marginalised by post-conflict reconstruction programming. In the absence of effective government initiatives, displaced youth have come up with self-identified income-generating activities outside socially accepted norms, including prostitution, gambling, sports betting and contemporary dancing. Improving youth employment opportunities will require the Ugandan government to involve young people more closely in policy formulation, implementation and evaluation; broaden the current definition of employment and localise national policies to address the needs of displaced communities in northern Uganda.

Why have displaced youth not benefited from employment policies?

Some formerly displaced youth have suffered discrimination and isolation due to communal and familial misjudgement. Some young women who returned from displacement with children have had their children labelled 'rebel children'. These children's access and use of services such as credit schemes and education scholarships have been stopped. Some returned youth are also labelled murderers, and where recommendations from opinion leaders, and community heads and even family heads are required as a way of benefiting from loan schemes and other forms of employment, they are denied such recommendations. The lack of supportive social networks hinders youth from institutionalised forms of employment, hence their return to jobs like sex work.

Yes I was abducted but I was confined and I did not kill anyone. I did not even hold a gun. I was married off and used to cook for others during the abduction... when we came back, people think we are all murderers and heartless. Neighbours mistreated me and no one wanted to talk to me. That's how I joined some other friends and we went

to the [town] centre, and later started prostitution for food, money and other needs.

(A returned female youth, aged between 23 and 25 years old)

Youth understanding of employment differs significantly from the state definition of employment. Institutional understandings consider time, wage and level of skills as critical for employment. Youth on the other hand consider ability to survive as a critical indicator of employment. As such, in addition to wages, youth efforts can be compensated using basic needs such as food as a way of drawing youth closer to long-term employment programmes. The long-term government programmes can therefore be implemented and meet the immediate needs of the local population. It is often the lack of basic needs being met that sabotages the long-term success and sustainability of programmes.

Formerly displaced youth-initiated coping strategies

Given persistent unemployment, displaced youth have devised survival strategies to enable them to deal with marginalisation and poor access

to formal employment opportunities. Formerly displaced youth in northern Uganda, for instance, have adopted activities that were previously considered socially and culturally unacceptable, but for these young people they are seen as valid forms of employment. These include sex work, gambling and sports betting, and contemporary dancing. So young people are not necessarily unemployed, but

rather are active in socially, culturally and legally unacceptable income-generating activities. Such youth employment has been overlooked by formal institutional policies to support youth employment. Consequently, some youth forms of income generation continue to be criminalised and despised, thereby disregarding the agency and active participation of the youth by presenting them as violent and idle.

Policy recommendations

1. It is crucial that institutional employment policy frameworks expound on the understanding of employment to reflect locally relevant circumstances which define the lived realities of the communities. To achieve this, state- and district-level officials working on youth employment need to involve formerly displaced youth, alongside other groups of young people, as active stakeholders to inform the policymaking process around unemployment. Policies that address youth employment need to take into account the lived realities of different groups of young people, including displaced youth. Displaced youth-centred approaches should prioritise context-specific approaches decentralised to locally, more pressing concerns. Context-specific analyses in relation to unemployment deserve attention in order to understand how local communities generate income and why certain portions of the population adopt particular strategies, and consequences thereafter.
2. Given the heterogeneity and diversity in local settings, contextualising the definition of youth to reflect local narratives and experiences is essential if relevant policies are to be generated and implemented especially at the local council levels. Local leaders at the village and family levels should inform policies that reflect the differences in the experiences of youth based on gender, age, roles and responsibilities and location. Formerly displaced youth have for instance missed out on education and therefore lack the skills and resources, e.g. land and even information relating to state policies and programmes intended for youth employment.
3. Programmes should also focus on the most marginalised among the returned youth in northern Uganda. Single categorical policy approaches, for instance those focused on either age (child soldiers) and gender (girls) may neglect intersecting forms of oppression that girl child soldiers endure. In addition, cultural leaders and local communal leaders need to adopt approaches that value non-wage or non-cash benefits. In-kind forms of employment can help improve the wellbeing of displaced youth, for example through improving nutrition.
4. Reconstruction policies implemented by non-governmental organisations and government, district and local councils need to implement community-level targeted interventions as a way of encouraging changes in behaviours and attitudes that currently exclude formerly displaced young people from their communities and prevent them from accessing services. Policies need to be designed in such a way that they promote the reintegration and resettlement of displaced youth, and the mutual benefits of doing so for both young people and their communities.

Further reading

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Namuggala, V. (2017, forthcoming) 'Gambling, Dancing and Sex Work: Rethinking Notions of Youth Employment in Uganda', *IDS Bulletin* 48.3

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Credits

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